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BY

JAMES O'NEILL

Judge of Seventeenth Judicial Circuit

[From Proceedings of The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1898]

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THE FUTURE OF NORTHERN WISCONSIN.¹

BY JAMES O'NEILL.

When, after a residence of a year in Wisconsin a quarter of a century ago, I revisited my old home in New York, I met a lawyer in whose office I had been a student. After the usual greetings the conversation ran into a discussion of the relative merits and advantages of the East and West. I was enthusiastic in praise of the rapidly developing new states of the Mississippi Valley, and especially of the State which I had selected for my future home. My friend grew impatient, and began to denounce the West and Western business and society. I remember, especially, his description of a Western railroad. He said we threw up over the prairies a turnpike, laid ties eight or ten feet apart, spiked rails across them, and called it a railroad. The city of Chicago was of mushroom growth, and in commerce and finance would always play a part unimportant compared with the great cities of the East. I parted from my friend smarting, somewhat, from the lash of his sarcasm.

A quarter of a century has elapsed. Chicago has grown to be a giant, and is fast approaching the importance of the metropolis of the great Empire State. The deposits in one of its banks during the past year exceeded that of any bank in the country. The Mississippi States, of which it is the center, have grown to be the richest and most important empire on the face of the globe. In capacity to produce all that is useful and staple for man's support and comfort, this Middle West is incomparably superior to the Atlantic States, including New York herself. We have lived to see the balance of political power pass from the East to the Mississippi Valley. I happened to be in

¹ Address before the State Historical Convention at Madison, February 23, 1899. The author is judge of the 17th judicial circuit.—ED.

the house of representatives when the test vote was taken on the location of the World's Fair. When the Western metropolis was chosen, it was a revelation to the East which startled them. I could turn the tables on my friend today, and by many facts and figures demonstrate the superiority in various directions of the new country, compared with the states where so many of us were born.

At the semi-centennial celebration last summer, in this city, I met a gentleman with whom I had, many years ago, a slight acquaintance. I approached him and found, as I expected, that it was necessary to give my name and to suggest my former connection with an Eastern institution with which both had had some relation. He recalled me at once, and then looking into my face with an air and voice of compassion, said: "Oh, you live somewhere up in northern Wisconsin, do you not?" There was an inflection on the words "somewhere" and "northern Wisconsin" which, it seemed to me, indicated that he pitied me for having gone to the wilderness, among the barbarians.

Well, I meet just such men in Chicago, and not infrequently in the capital and metropolis of our own State. I am ready to inform such people that we in the north need no pity; that we are proud of the whole State; and that we believe the northern half of it is steadily advancing to a position in which, in production of the fruits of the earth, of the staples necessary to the sustenance and comfort of man, in the products of mines and forests, in commerce, and in the possession of a cultivated and enlightened citizenship, it will not suffer by comparison with the southern portion. So I will premise by the statement that I am enthusiastic over the development of northern Wisconsin, and exceedingly hopeful of its future.

The line which separates what may be called northern and southern Wisconsin is not definite. It seems fair to divide the seventy counties of the State equally, and this can be done by taking Brown, Shawano, Marathon, Portage, Wood, Clark, Trempealeau, and all the counties north of these. for the northern half. These thirty-five counties comprise 18,516,583 acres as against 13,500,783 acres in the southern portion.

The population in this northern territory in 1855 was 24,236; in 1880 it had increased to 144,000; in 1895 it was 609,560. Several counties were almost uninhabited twenty years ago. The population of Douglas county in 1880 was only 655; in 1895 it was 30,000, and is now much larger. That of Ashland was then 1,559; now 17,000. Each of these counties now contains a large city, important as centers of commerce and promising much in the future.

At the close of the War of Secession, Eau Claire county had a population of 5,000; in 1895 it was 33,000, and it now contains a city which is the great railroad and commercial center of the northwestern part of the State.

Lincoln county started in 1880 with a population of 2,000, and has increased eight fold. Its county seat, Merrill, is a flourishing manufacturing town.

Marinette has trebled its population in twenty years; its county seat, in connection with its sister across the river in Michigan, enjoys the distinction of being the greatest lumbering manufacturing district in the world. Where was a wilderness only twenty years ago, will now be found a city of about 20,000; a hotel costing \$100,000; an elegant opera house; and modern luxuries.

The assessed valuation of the land in the northern portion, as fixed by the State Board last year, was \$62,736,178 as against \$192,649,393 for the southern half. Thus it will be seen that the south is rated as worth over three times as much as the north. The total value of all property in the State is fixed at \$600,000,000, of which the southern section is assigned \$470,000,000, and the northern \$130,000,000 — which again is a ratio of over three to one.

I just pause to prophesy this as to the future: that every census hereafter will see a noticeable approach in the north to the values in the south, and that within the lives of some now living, it is likely the wealth of the first will exceed that of the latter.

The first settlers of northern Wisconsin were largely from New England, New York, and Canada. Accessions from these sources have been pouring in steadily for the past twenty-five

years; and in addition there has been enrichment of German and Scandinavian blood. This blending has produced a thrifty, industrious, and progressive people, perfectly fitted to the work of clearing the forests and opening hill and valley into beautiful farms.

The Germans, especially, have contributed to the agricultural prosperity of Wisconsin. I chanced to meet Ex-Governor Hoard a short time ago, on his return from a lecturing tour among the farmers of central and northern New York. He described the remarkable depreciation in the value of farm lands in that State. Farms formerly worth \$15,000 to \$20,000 are now selling for \$5,000 to \$8,000. The price has dropped from \$70 to \$80 per acre down to \$20 to \$40. Mr. Hoard's explanation is this: Farmer boys do not stay on the farms. They seek work on the railroads and in the cities, and many go West. So the number of thrifty farmers is constantly diminishing.

My own observations in this State indicate that here the conditions are precisely the contrary. When the oldest son of a German farmer marries, the father buys him a farm. By economy and forethought, provision has been made for this event. Then the remainder of the family begin to save to buy a place for the next boy. Then the next is provided for, and so the family is planted about the parents; and all go steadily and merrily on, in a prosperous career. The farms become beautiful and fruitful, and values steadily advance. As times go on, these farmers have bank accounts, and their sons and daughters begin to fill the high schools and the University, returning generally to apply their learning in agricultural pursuits. I have observed this condition in my own county. In that town where farms are highest in price, the population is most largely German. So there has been no such depression in farm land here, as in New York. In northern Wisconsin there has been a remarkable advance within two or three years.

EDUCATION.

These pioneers of the north have brought with them the common school and all its blessings. Go where you will in the forests of this State, and as soon as a few families have hewed out

rude homes, a good school house is erected at a section corner. It is refreshing to go into new settlements, and in a drive through the woods to come suddenly upon a pretty, new school house, with all modern conveniences, and to meet the rosy children and blooming school mistress.

There was expended in the last school year, in the thirty-five counties which I have mentioned, for school purposes, \$1,204,000.

The sons and daughters of these people are filling the normal schools, academies, and the State University. So although much of the country is new, this people will be accompanied by all the light and culture exhibited in the older communities. No rioters or anarchists are bred here; all are true and patriotic—such material as will forever be the bulwark of a great and expanding nation.

FORESTS.

The forests of northern Wisconsin have been, and are still, rich in valuable timber. The late report of the forestry commissioner indicates that in the twenty-five years from 1873 to 1898, there has been cut and manufactured in twenty-seven of the northern counties sixty-six billion feet of pine, and that there is left only fifteen billion. It is estimated also that there is left sixteen billion feet of hardwood, being oak, basswood, birch, elm, ash and maple. It is said in this report, "The importance of the forest to the State of Wisconsin as a factor of wealth, is very great." The statement that "The wood industries have built every mile of railway and wagon roads, every church and school house, and nearly every town, and that in addition they have enabled the clearing of half the improved land of North Wisconsin" is by no means extravagant.

The lumber industry, especially in hardwood, will continue for a long period, probably fifty years, and will be a constant source of profit.

AGRICULTURE.

The writer hereof was born and reared on a farm; and during the quarter of a century he has lived in this State, he has almost constantly owned and conducted a small stock farm,

which has served as a diversion from the anxiety of professional duty. How delightful to turn from the strife of the court room to the sight of growing grains, green pastures, and flocks and herds! A gentleman who has held high official position in this State, and who is now occupying a responsible position in a great institution, with a salary of ten thousand a year, told me he would enjoy leaving the "prison" — a term used to describe his elegant office where he spends his business hours — and go out to live on a farm, where he could be close to nature and her delights. I imagine that when that same man was a boy, he dreamed he would be supremely happy if he could ever reach such a position of honor and confidence as the one he now holds.

One of the justices of our supreme court has for years owned and managed a large farm. It brings him joy and health, and assists in keeping him in sympathy and touch with the masses of the people. He is exalted in my mind as a man and citizen, on account of his pastoral tastes.¹

Three thousand years ago a sacred writer said: "Thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways and to fear him, for the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land; a land of brooks and of water, of fountains, and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of oil, olive and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness; thou shalt not lack anything in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayst dig brass." Truly, northern Wisconsin is a land of "brooks and of water, of fountains, and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; of wheat and barley and honey; wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, and whose stones are iron."

Now that the lumber interest is declining, the true and substantial basis of the prosperity of this section of the State is coming to be observed. The southern half of this section is already well advanced, and the coming twenty-five years will be marked by surprising agricultural development. Lands which have been covered with maple, oak, basswood and elm, are generally

¹ The late Justice S. U. Pinney, who happened at that time to be in the audience.— Ed.

a clay loam and very fertile; and a large portion of this section is of this character. Of course there are swamps and sandy belts, but when the swamps are drained they are found to be fertile, and especially adapted to raising hay. The sandy belts are suited to producing root crops, and especially potatoes.

In pasturage, and capacity to produce hay, it is believed northern Wisconsin excels every other portion of the United States. And so it is fast becoming a great producer of cattle, sheep, and horses, and butter and cheese. It used to be considered that cattle had to be fed so many months in the year that we could not compete with southern Wisconsin and Illinois. But it is now demonstrated that in a large portion of the section under consideration, any difference in climate is fully compensated by richness and persistency of pasturage, and larger crops of hay. When in the summer and fall, in Rock, Green, and Walworth counties, the pastures are brown and bare, those in Clark, Marathon, Dunn, and Price are fresh and green.

Osseo and Mondovi are two small villages in Trempealeau and Buffalo counties respectively. The former shipped last year 700 cars of agricultural products, and the latter over 900 — mostly cattle, sheep, and hogs. There was distributed among the farmers in these localities, from this source alone, nearly a million dollars. In this connection, Senator Whelan, of Mondovi, a business man and banker, having means of information, states that within the past three years over \$50,000 of mortgages on farms in this vicinity has been paid off. In a few years these farmers will be lenders instead of borrowers.

A paragraph in a Menomonie paper states that one buyer in that city shipped \$54,000 worth of hogs last year to a packing house in Eau Claire.

When I came to Wisconsin in 1873, the principal business in Clark county was lumbering. Large quantities of supplies were shipped in, but no products of the farm were shipped out. Now, all is changed. With the decline of lumbering has come a development of agriculture and dairying, which insures a more permanent and abundant prosperity. According to the census of 1895, Clark county contained farm lands valued at

\$3,966,000. There were cattle valued at \$240,000; sheep valued at \$35,000; horses valued at \$120,000; hay valued at \$300,000; oats valued at \$120,000; potatoes worth \$50,000; butter worth \$128,000; and milch cows worth \$168,000. The last four years have greatly increased these amounts. One Saturday last fall, I happened to be at the depot at my home, and saw a shipment of thirteen cars of stock. I was told that there was distributed that day to the farmers for this, upwards of \$10,000. A steady stream of money is now coming to our farmers for butter, cheese, hogs, cattle, and sheep; the financial condition of the producers is vastly better than it ever was in the palmy days of lumbering. I may be pardoned for saying that I believe Clark is the gem of the northern counties, and within the next quarter century will be one of the richest counties in the State.

Let us turn to a county farther north. I suppose that many people believe that Price county is only a lumbering region, not fitted for agriculture. My friend, M. A. Thayer, under date February 15th of this year, writes me of the products and prospects of the country about Phillips:

The products of Price county are all grains, peas, clovers and grasses especially fine, vegetables that cannot be excelled, and small fruits to perfection, with winter protection. Early corn generally matures, late corn uncertain; sheep, the dairy and their support are the natural products of this section.

Answering yours of yesterday, further would say, we are growing some apples, plums and cherries, but as in most of Wisconsin, they are still in an experimental state, and must be limited to half a dozen varieties. In small fruits such as can be protected in winter, I have been completely surprised at the quality and quantity that can be produced here. I have grown small fruits for many years in southern parts of the State, but have never equalled Price county for vigor of plant, quality and perfection of fruit, and large yields. I attribute this to abundance of snow in the winter to protect against severe weather, late springs preventing early maturity of fruit buds, and quick warm soil giving rapid growth of berry. Our crop is usually a week or ten days later than southern Wisconsin and Michigan, thus giving us better market and ready sales. I have twenty acres in strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, currants and gooseberries. The special advantages of this section will be found in the natural grasses and clover producing qualities of the soil insuring us, beyond a doubt, a first class dairy country.

Two hundred and fifty new families found homes in Price county last year, and prospects now are that more than double the number will locate here during the year 1899.

Good cheap lands on long time and easy payments is sure to settle and improve this country rapidly.

Mr. Thayer's statements are worthy of credit, for he is demonstrating the truth of his theories.

The limit of my paper is reached, and I must omit many subjects worthy of consideration. The commerce of the lake ports, the manufacturing industries and the building of thrifty cities and villages, deserve notice, but must be passed. Northern Wisconsin is great and prosperous, but her period of most substantial development is only now in sight. The next quarter century will bring her well up in productive wealth with the southern half of the State, resulting in a commonwealth of patriotic, progressive, and intelligent citizenship, rich in agriculture, manufactures, and commerce, and to which, as one of the great family of States, we may point with justifiable pride.



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